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REGULATION OF PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS¹

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IT is only three and a half years since the first suggestion was made that public amusements might be regulated by statute; and we were told then by thinkers and students that we were planning an almost impossible thing. Yet to-day we are discussing the regulation of public amusements as a national social question.

In the city of Cleveland, Ohio, on any Saturday night, there are ten thousand boys and girls in public dance-halls, and we do not know how many additional thousands in motion-picture shows and theaters or attending private parties. In the city of Wilkesbarre, Pennsylvania, where they have a population of about 65,000, between five and six thousand people nightly are visiting amusement places of all kinds, dance-halls, motion-picture shows, vaudeville theaters and the like. In New York city in any one week about one hundred thousand boys and girls may learn to dance in dancing academies alone. In view of such facts is it not worth while to consider whether the community ought to regulate public amusements?

Have we no responsibility toward the thousands of young people who, night after night, throughout the whole country, make use of public amusement facilities? The story is the same in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco. Everywhere we find the same standards, the same resources, affording the same resulting dangers, the same class of people making use of these places, and, alas, the same ignorance with regard to the effect on the lives of young people.

There are only two methods by which we may deal with the problem of public amusements. One is regulation by statute, and the other is regulation by public opinion. Regulation by statute works, if the statute is adequate and receives sincere enforcement. New York is the pioneer in regulation by statute.

¹ Read at the meeting of the Academy of Political Science, April 19, 1912.

Fifteen cities throughout the country have followed New York's example and either have enacted regulations governing public amusements or are considering it, and in six other cities the question of regulation is being studied and has not yet reached the stage of submission to the public. An efficient regulation of public amusements must take account of two things: the amusements themselves and the conditions under which the amusements are offered. No regulation is effectual that simply considers the amusement by itself. Statutory regulation of the dance hall to-day deals primarily with the conditions under which dancing is offered. It licenses premises in which dancing goes on, and in only two cities, thus far, has it gone farther than that and dealt with the amusement itself or with the individuals offering that amusement. In the cities where the dance-hall regulation has gone so far as to require that every public dance offered shall have a license, the regulation has been most effective; it therefore seems reasonably clear that that is the only way in which we can effectively regulate public dancing. First, we must place conditions upon the conduct of the premises themselves, and then upon the kind of amusements taking place on those premises.

This applies with equal force to the motion-picture theater, the vaudeville theater, and the burlesque show. For a few years, until we educate public opinion, we may need a moral and educational censorship. This ought to be coöperative as between managers of amusement enterprises and the public. This would prevent such obscenities as are to-day being uttered upon the boards of some of the burlesque theaters in New York from coming before the enormous audiences of boys and young men who frequent them.

Public opinion regulates all forms of amusements, not only those requiring an admission fee, but the public parks and the free amusements offered by the city. Public opinion says how many lights there shall be in a park at night; how many lights there shall be on a recreation pier; what kind of people shall supervise these places; what sort of amusements they shall offer, in addition to being breathing spots or ornamental show places. Public opinion may also regulate private enterprise, but public opinion has to be educated to appreciate the need

for regulating private enterprise. Private amusement enterprises to-day are the open door for the social evil. It is in these places of amusement where girls go unguarded and unsupervised that they are sought for by men and women who mean no good to them. We have the right to demand that these places shall be socially supervised since they cannot be personally supervised. By social supervision I mean the supervision that is given by the community as a whole through inspection. Until we have sufficient publicity regarding the conditions of public amusement enterprises, we shall not have efficient public censorship of the kind that really forms and guides public opinion into action. The needs of the poor are something broader and more human than merely shelter clothing and sufficient food. The little child, the boy and girl and the father and mother need a relief from the tasks of the daily round of life just as keenly as they need food and clothing and shelter. We bring art into our lives because of its cultural and softening influence upon ourselves and our children. We need to bring it wholesomely and carefully and sanely into the lives of all our people; we need to see that they get the right kind of recreation, because recreation is an art, too. The wrong kind of recreation has disastrous results; the right kind, even if it be so humble a thing as a five-cent moving-picture show, may bring about an uplift that is equal to almost any form of art. The film that shows Indian life in Bombay may open a whole new world to a woman who has had neither life nor soul outside of her washtubs all day.

Thus we owe a public duty to each of the millions of people availing themselves of the commercial forms of recreation. We must see to it that the places where they are offered amusement are safe and wholesome and decent, and that the wrong kind of people are kept out. It can be done by statute. It can be required that every night in the week there shall be someone whose duty it is to see that every place in the city is properly conducted. An inspector of dance halls can be required, as in Cleveland, to know not only every dance hall in his city, but the committee of every club which applies for the use of any of those dance halls. He should determine whether the group which represents "The Jolly Tumblers" or "The Four Leaved Clover" is a proper group to be allowed to con-

duct a public ball to which girls may come. Not only can this be done, but it is being done. There is at least one man who knows and controls absolutely, by virtue of statutory power, just what goes on in every public ball-room in the city of which he is the public inspector.

For a practical working program in the regulation of public amusements the first requirement is knowledge. The church, the school and social organizations of every kind need to know at first hand what the amusement forces of their neighborhood are; need to know what they are doing, and how they affect the lives of the people. On this basis they must make out a constructive program.

Any constructive plan must allow not only for regulation, but for substitution of the right kind of resources for the wrong kind. The city must have recreation centers and amusement places conducted for the people who cannot, or will not, or need not pay for what they get. The city owes a recreational duty to these people. But we must also keep a watchful eye upon what is offered to the public commercially in the guise of amusement. If we are able to show to the management of all amusement places that we can control their audiences so as to make it pay to offer wholesome, decent performances, they will give such performances. Once we can show the dance hall that it need not sell liquor or entertain the underworld in order to make money, we have taken a long step toward making dancing as wholesome and safe as it ought to be.

Fundamentally, however, we must admit to ourselves and to the world that young people and old ones as well need and will have recreation. Play is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity to the working world to-day. The regulation of amusement is nothing more than the extension, socially, broadly, generally, of the supervision that wise men and women give in a private capacity to the young people with whom they associate from day to day. Even though we do not personally associate with the boys and girls who make up the five millions annually using the dance-halls in New York city, we must appreciate our responsibilities toward them. We tend rapidly to that point.